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LIFE AT THREE DISTANCES

Two men, a poet and physician - the poet was Maeterlinck,* and I use his language - stood on a hill in Normandy overlooking a plain where peasants were harvesting wheat. The distant scene was very lovely. Overhead a magnificent sky. Far away the ocean. By it the parish church with its cluster of lime trees and its homely graveyard. And yonder the peasants, men and women, with simple, strong, rhythmic movements building in the wheat stack what the physician calls their monument of life. The distant scene, says he, the air of evening

The first is Paradise. Paradise of children, Paradise of poets, weave their joyous cries into a kind of song without words which replies to the noble song of the leaves as they whisper over our heads. Paradise of those who expect at once the Age of Gold. It is the Land where Santa Claus is still alive. It is the Land of Song where

When the two men had for a time sensed from afar this exquisite Pastoral Symphony - type of all pastoral poems and songs - they drew near where the peasants were at work. Then all the beauty vanished.

The physician noted that they suffered from the curses of overwork and vice. Some were alcoholic, diseased, deformed, imbecile. Some he knew to be mean, avaricious, jealous, obscene. I could give you, said he, the minutest details of the meanness, deceit, injustice, malice which underlie this picture of ethereal toil. This, he declared, is the truth of practical life, based upon the most precise and only facts which one can observe and test.

But then, the physician continued, let us look again. Let us not reject a single one of these sordid facts. But let us see also

(*) The story of the Three Distances is condensed (quoted and paraphrased) from Maeterlinck's *Life of the Bee*, Pages 328-344.

the great and curious force which lies back of them. Lowly as they are these peasants are not so low as their ancestors before the French Revolution. Just as they are they share in the upward struggle of life and mind. So thought our liberated blacks in 1865. What one thinks of life as a whole, says Maeterlinck, and of almost every moment of it depends upon whether he sees it from the first or the second or the third of these three distances - far off in the glow of romance, close up to its ugly worst, or inside where Life makes its upward fight.

These three views show the three estates of men.

Now run tell Elijah

To hurry up Pomp

To meet us I - Paradise

Down by the swamp

The first is Paradise. Paradise of children, Paradise of poets, Paradise of those who expect at once the Age of Gold. It is the Land where Santa Claus is still alive. It is the Land of Song where an end, they cried. The year's at the Spring, in this horrible four
The day's at the morn,
The lark's on the wing, sword and with hunger
God's in his Heaven,
All's right with the World. wrath of God which
All's right with the World. So thought the captive Jew in But
Babylon. The warfare of his people was accomplished, their iniquities were pardoned, their afflictions overpast. They were now to go back and reign in a glorified Jerusalem to which the dromedaries of Midian and the flocks of Kedar and the ships of Tarshish and the Kings of strange nations would come bringing the wealth and homage of the world forevermore.

II - Paradise Lost

All's right with the World. So thought the French Republicans But alas, it is hard to stay in Paradise. Clergymen with nicely laundered voices hush the memory of Adam's Fall and the Lamentations poor ran together with spades and barrows to erect on the Field of Mars an Altar of Liberty. A year before they had pulled down the and the hell of John Calvin and make the text read: Except ye repent

Bastille. With it they had pulled down the world - old tyrannies of Church and State. And now they were to establish the reign of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity forevermore. All's right with the World. So thought our liberated blacks in 1865. I remember a song they sang in honor of one of their prophets who had foretold the good day, and who had left the dying charge that he be awakened from his grave for the great jubilee. In '65 they thought that the great jubilee was at hand and sang: Swift, Nietzsche, Shakespeare, the

The good time's coming
It's almost here.
It's been long, long, long on the way
Now run tell Elijah
To hurry up Pomp
To meet us at the gum tree
Down by the swamp
To wake Nicodemus today.

All's right with the World. So thought millions of men and women, in all the warring nations on Armistice Day of 1918. War is at an end, they cried. We have finished with war in this horrible four year Armageddon. We have been tormented with sword and with hunger and with death. We have drunk of the wine of the wrath of God which was poured out without mixture into the cup of His indignation. But all that is now past. The oppression of the laborer is past. The oppression of the backward races and of the little nations is past. The wicked devices of secret diplomacy, with its secret covenants, secretly arrived at - all that is past. The Age of Gold has come. We have found Paradise.

destroy the plagues, yellow fever, tuberculosis, syphilis and the rest.

II - Paradise Lost

The scholar undertakes conditions which multiply But alas, it is hard to stay in Paradise. Clergymen with nicely laundered voices hush the memory of Adam's Fall and the Lamentations of Jeremiah and the despair of Ecclesiastes and the torments of Job and the hell of John Calvin and make the text read: Except ye repent

(in a degree) and be converted (to an extent) ye shall be damned (in a measure). But that text will not do for the physician who every day sees disease at its ugliest. It will not do for the social physician, who finds in several districts of one Indiana township more than half the children imbecile as a result of vice. And that jelly fish text will not now do for any of us who find a World Peace of bloodshed and wholesale starvation not less dreadful than the World War. No wonder we have the great pessimists - Moliere, Schopenhauer, Swift, Nietzsche. Shakespeare, the greatest of them, did not imagine any city or state in which a great and good man could succeed or even survive except as a hermit. Shakespeare has no hero. Brutus and Hamlet go down to death and the generous but disillusioned Timon cries.

whose experience is most bitter and whose All is oblique most black can find a great There's nothing level in our cursed natures the worst that you have met But direct villainy. Therefore be abhorred. I fight to the end with All feasts societies and throngs of men. ** James fights

not with despair, with sheer rather and exultation, a trumpet at his lips. One like Booker Washington is victim of a race hatred from which there seems no escape - and he escapes. No man - I heard him say it - no race shall III - Paradise Regained hate them. One like

Lincoln Nevertheless ----- It is possible to know the worst and not be a pessimist - to meet the worst without fear, without surrender.

The scholar at his best does so. The scholar undertakes to destroy the plagues, yellow fever, tuberculosis, syphilis and the rest.

The scholar undertakes to destroy the conditions which multiply the epileptic, the blind, the imbecile. of nameless men and women who

The scholar undertakes to fight poverty by finding new and unlimited energies in place of coal and by furnishing the conditions for economic liberty which underlies political liberty. Chief and Harlot -

The scholar knows the physical hells better than anyone else and he is not afraid. Without fear, without haste, without rest, he goes about to destroy them and to make, not a new heaven, but a new earth. In all these things this University, throughout its hundred years, has played and now plays its part.

Still greater is the work of poet and prophet. These men do not give us food or coal or medicine. They give us a more necessary thing. They teach us with what will to meet the meanness, uncleanness, cruelty, treachery and hate which are everywhere among men and in all human institutions. They are not all alike, these men. They are of every sort. There are many hundreds of you graduates and you have every variety of disposition and of experience. But the one of you whose experience is most bitter and whose disposition is most black can find a great man who is like yourself, who has met the worst that you have met and has fought his way through. One like Elijah fights to the end with the courage of despair. One like William James fights not with despair, with cheer rather and exultation, a trumpet at his lips. One like Booker Washington is victim of a race hatred from which there seems no escape - and he escapes. No man - I heard him say it - no race shall degrade me by making me hate them. One like Lincoln faces the tragic years with grief, but also with laughter, with unbroken patience and unbroken will.

Does no one of these men win you to his banner of faith and of battle?

Then I show you a greater sight.

I show you the countless multitude of nameless men and women who come up through the awful centuries covered with dust and blood, but who never quite despair and who never surrender. Jew and Greek, Barbarian and Scythian, Scholar and Clown, Publican, Thief and Harlot -

how different they are, how alike they are - the glory and shame of the world!

Go up above them if you can - as far as you can into the world of beauty and goodness even as the Son of Man went up into the Mountain of Transfiguration.

But you can never go high enough alone to reach Paradise.

You must go down with the Son of Man into the thick of the struggling multitude. You belong with them. You are of one blood and of like passions with them. You must march with them. You must march in the dread pageant which goes to Golgotha. It may be to hang there between thieves, and it may be to find victory when you can say to one of them: Brother, this day together we enter Paradise.

When the two men had for a time ceased from afar this exquisite pastoral symphony - type of all pastoral poems and songs - they saw near where the passage was at hand. When all the beauty vanished. The physician noted that they suffered from the curse of overwork and vice. Some were alcoholic, diseased, deformed, imbecile. Some he knew to be mean, envious, jealous, obscene. I could give you said he the minutest details of the manners, the dirt, injustice, malice which underlie this picture of ethereal toil. This, he declared, is the truth of practical life based upon the most precise and only facts which one can observe and test.

But then, the physician continued, let us look again. Let us not reject a single one of these sordid facts. But let us see also the great and curious forces which lie back of them. Lonely as they are these peasants are not so low as their ancestors before the French Revolution.

Foot Note: The story of the Three Distances is condensed (quoted and paraphrased) from Masterlinck's Life of the See pages 232-244.